

Agenda 21 for Common Collaboration in Theological Education – Findings of the Birmingham process

From 6-9th April 2011 some 25 representatives of partner organizations in theological education, mission agencies, scholarship organizations and REOs met at Queens Foundation for a consultation on “International Partnership and Funding Strategies for Theological Education”, a joint international consultation hosted together by ETE/WCC and Queens Foundation for the sharing of information on challenges, priorities and collaboration needs in theological education. The following presents the findings of this consultation:

I) Common Convictions

Coming together from various social, political and denominational backgrounds and realizing that the contexts of today’s world – and the different landscapes of theological education - are marked by extreme diversities, glaring inequalities and imbalances between rich and poor, the participants were able nevertheless to articulate some common fundamental convictions on the understanding of theological education, training or formation.¹:

- 1) Ongoing socio-economic changes, demographic shifts and increasing urgency of interfaith realities which are affecting the life of churches underline the fundamental need for strengthening appropriate theological education. Theological education is vital for the future, the continuity and integral witness of churches in World Christianity, both in the North and in the South.
- 2) In many churches there are increasing needs for well trained theological pastors, catechists and church leaders.
- 3) Many newly emerging churches from Evangelical, Charismatic or Pentecostal backgrounds as well as historical churches from Orthodox, Catholic or Protestant backgrounds have become more aware of the urgent needs for comprehensive Christian leadership development for both lay and ordained people, both women and men.
- 4) Changing contexts of theological education today call for more pedagogical training of theological educators and development of communication skills and pastoral competence of ministers.
- 5) Theological education is an organic part of Christian mission and thus a *common* challenge and need for all Christian Churches. We therefore need to strengthen interdenominational cooperation in theological education and institutions supported inter-denominationally to serve ministerial formation.
- 6) Basic theological education needs to be grounded in the realities of the local and regional context in order to secure the contextual relevance and relatedness of theological education – contextualization of curricula, content and style of theological education remains an urgent priority. The different levels of theological education – on local, diocesan and regional level – should be properly related to each other.
- 7) Edinburgh 2010 had talked about “mission from everywhere to everywhere” as a mark of Christian mission in the 21st century. It is therefore vital for theological education to have proper exchange between different ecclesial, social and cultural contexts. Cross-cultural theological education is a priority for the future both within and between different regional contexts, based on mutuality and reciprocity. While several organizations emphasize theological exchange in South-South relations it remains a vital need also to secure ongoing exchange between South and North and East and West. Churches in different contexts need each other and learn from each other in theological education in order to remain connected to the one universal body of Christ.
- 8) Despite increasing economic and legal difficulties (visa barriers, financial constraints, academic limitations), institutions of theological education in the North need to raise their funds and continue to receive international theological students.

¹ The participants were aware of different terminologies used in different contexts to describe formation towards Christian ministry, as some would refer to theological education, some to ministerial formation, or ministry training. This paper is based on a broad concept of theological formation which holds together the different elements (see also point I, 10 and 11)

- 9) Appropriate models of partnership and sharing need to be strengthened between institutions of theological education in different regions in order to allow for authentic learning, the overcoming of contextual captivities and limitations in theology and avoid isolation, de-contextualization or cultural dominance of any Christian church.
- 10) There is a movement towards a broadened convergence and some substantial common ground between the different actors in theological education from so-called evangelical and ecumenical background on essential elements in the understanding of holistic theological education. We are committed to deepen dialogue between Evangelical, Pentecostal, Protestant and other Historical Churches in order to overcome stereotypes of mutual perceptions and to contribute to a mutually enriching and mutually learning process in theological education. This can lead to enabling more collaborative efforts both on international and in regional levels in strengthening theological education.
- 11) We converge in a holistic and broad concept of theological education which brings together sound biblical grounding, rootedness in the tradition of the church, academic theological excellence, pastoral competence, spiritual and liturgical learning, character formation as well as training in skills of leadership, stewardship and management.²
- 12) International networking and mutual collaboration between agencies supporting theological education is less organized, structured and visible at present than international cooperation between development agencies. Nevertheless, for the international fellowship of Christian churches cooperation in theological education is as vital as cooperation in diakonia and development. It is only through theological education that churches are equipped to properly interact with society and to give a credible witness.
- 13) Determining and defining the core content of theological education is a constant need and process of adaptation within a given mission context of a church which needs the involvement of all the various actors contributing to processes of theological education (supporting churches, actors of society, actors in academy, mission partners).

II) Major challenges and issues to be further discussed

- 1) There is a need to reconsider the relationship between religion and development, theology and socio-political transformation, theological education and development agencies. Theological education is not confined to issues related to inner church maintenance, but addresses the whole range of issues relevant for the socio-political context in which churches are operating. Thus theological education contributes to social transformation, leadership capacity building and poverty reduction. Funding policies of development agencies which have sidelined the work of churches and its institutions for theological education thus have to be reconsidered. More explicit cooperation between development agencies and theological education is recommended and partly practised already in several contexts of the South while in other cases development agencies seem to be working explicitly against or without faith-based organizations such as Christian churches.
- 2) There is a need to develop more contextualized curriculum models in theological education and to increase understanding of the process and criteria of contextualization in theological education more properly.
- 3) There is a lack of mutual recognition and transferability of degrees and theological courses among theological universities and colleges. Thus the issue of proper accreditation mechanisms, quality standards and common criteria for quality improvement in higher theological education needs to be on the agenda. An increasing number of churches is faced with demands to respond both to the requirements of governments and to demands for more mutual compatibility and quality control of theological education programmes within their regions.
- 4) We need to do more research and dialogues on the appropriate ways to assess the actual needs for theological education and leadership development in the regions. The suggestion was made to move

² See also: World Study Report on Theological Education (from the Edinburgh 2010 process), WCC/ETE 2009/2010 (available in the internet, see WCC website)

towards a major project for mapping the needs and the resources available for theological education in the regions.

- 5) In several contexts there is a trend to establish more Christian universities, some on denominational basis. This trend, its implications for theological education and related questions of sustainability should be carefully studied and monitored.
- 6) The issue of financial sustainability of theological education programmes and institutions needs to be on the agenda for future research and collaboration. Although the majority of resources for TE seem to be raised locally in many contexts immense needs for financial support are still being articulated, dependencies sometimes continue and lack of long-term stability of TE institutions is a predominant feature in several regions.
- 7) Many organisations prefer scholarship requests not just being articulated by isolated individual candidates but endorsed and accompanied by letters of recommendation from sending churches and/or colleges. In addition the need was expressed to have a comprehensive overall leadership development plan or a master plan for theological faculty and staff development in order to have long term perspectives developed by the churches in the different regions.
- 8) The debate on an integral concept of international partnership in theological education needs to be continued. There is a need for clarifying the core elements for a proper concept of international partnership in theological education (like criteria, code of conducts, guiding values and principles of transparency, operational standards of partnerships in theological education).
- 9) There are many attempts to strengthen women's empowerment in theological education, but the implementation is still lacking and women's participation in theological education remains a critical issue in many cultural and social contexts in World Christianity.
- 10) We need to continue the international discourse on how to develop models of theological education which are affordable, accessible and communicable in contexts of poverty and huge rural regions in different contexts (theological education by extension movement to be strengthened).
- 11) We need to deepen our learning in the area of how to communicate about theological education to the wider public: How can we develop a more inviting concept and image of theological education which presents a more attractive picture of Christian leadership formation and inter-generational sharing of theological knowledge. Only with a transformed profile will it be possible to get more support and more qualified people to join programmes and work in theological education.

III) Areas for cooperation

Participants are interested in and committed to explore or increase cooperation and further work in the following areas:

- 1) Joint programmes and innovative models for theological teachers development (cross-cultural PhD projects, split degree programmes, international supervisors for theses, combined programmes in the home-context and abroad, programmes with e-learning dimension etc.);
- 2) New programmes of distant learning, e-learning and connected interactive programmes for theological education;
- 3) Experiences and complementary approaches in the area of theological scholarships, including improved communication tools to allow for better access of information on grants and support available from partners for theological education (common global portal for theological scholarships?);
- 4) Creative strategies for resource development, sharing information and funding strategies in theological education;
- 5) Further steps to deepen the dialogue with Evangelical, Independent and Pentecostal Partners in theological education;
- 6) Interaction between Diaspora theological educators and home-based institutions of theological education;
- 7) Increased regional empirical research on trends and developments in theological education;

- 8) Efforts to strengthen the role of regional funds for theological education in Asia, Africa and Latin America in cooperation with REOs and regional associations of theological schools;
- 9) Efforts to secure a broader spectrum of support for the continuation of the Programme on Theological Education in WCC
- 10) Sharing digital resources and programmes on theological education;

IV) Suggestions for follow-up

Participants agreed on the following suggestions for follow-up for the international Birmingham process on theological education:

- 1) The process of sharing information and exploring different areas of collaboration between different partners supporting theological education should be continued;
- 2) A small (open) continuation and planning group should be appointed³ to plan another consultation with a broadened spectrum of participating of partners and/or focussed on a specific topic in the area of enhancing theological education (like scholarships, fundraising or international partnerships in theological education);
- 3) A common website of partner organisations in theological education and an e-group should be planned for increased networking;
- 4) ETE/WCC should be mandated to provide a continued international platform of major partners in theological education which can accompany and support both this vital global programme of WCC and its strategic partners in the regions;
- 5) Appropriate instruments should also be developed to bring together partners for theological education with major actors within the regions;
- 6) Partner organisations should come together to engage in working alliances with regard to support and partnership with hubs for higher theological education in the different regions;
- 7) Ways should be explored to provide more easier access to digital theological resources for theological research and education (GlobeTheoLib as one example);
- 8) The initiative for a Global Theological Institute (International Advanced Ecumenical Course) for Theological Students and younger Theological Lecturers prior to the WCC assembly in Busan should be supported and prepared by a group which incorporates associations, major partners and Korean churches.
- 9) The forthcoming assembly of the WCC should engage church leaders and major actors to address issues related to the emerging crisis and increased needs for theological education in World Christianity;

Participants from the following organizations were present: Church of Scotland/Council for World Mission, Anglican Communion/Theological Education Working Party, United Evangelical Mission (UEM), Methodist Church GB, EMW/Association of Protestant Churches and Missions, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), Lutheran World Service India, Overseas Council International, Ecumenical Mission Training Center National Council of Churches in Korea, Danmission, Church of Sweden, USPG, EKD/ Ecumenical Relations and Scholarship Desk, reSource Leadership International, Kerkinactie, Foundation for Theological Education in South East Asia, Feed the Minds UK, Overseas Council Europe,

³ Appointed were: Robin Butarbutar (UEM), Tammy Jackson (ELCA), Manfred Kohl (Overseas Council), Bunmi Olayisade (Methodist Church, UK), Joshva Raja (Queens Foundation), Dietrich Werner (ETE/WCC)

Oxford Center for World Mission, Cambridge Theological Federation/Ridley Hall Cambridge, Queens
Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education, Globethics.net, WCC, All African Conference of
Churches, Christian Conference of Asia
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BIRMINGHAM THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION CONFERENCE – APRIL 2011

Feedback from the “listeners”:

Edgar Ruddock:

- 1) Mission context and values
 - a. What are we training people FOR?
 - b. Training to cross boundaries
 - c. Training in and for context
 - d. Denominational/ecumenical issues
- 2) Staff development and support
 - a. The role of accompaniment
 - b. Mentoring
 - c. Coaching
- 3) Sustainability
 - a. Retention of staff (salary levels)
 - b. Strengthening management skills
 - c. Financial viability
 - d. Value of libraries
- 4) Western donor culture
 - a. Changes in the way donors identify what they will support
 - b. Pressure on donor churches for self-survival
 - c. Exploring new opportunities
- 5) Transformative training
 - a. What does transformational training/formation actually look like?
 - b. Anticipating the world of tomorrow, and training towards it
 - c. Focus on the desired outcomes of ministry
 - d. Bringing together academe and skills acquisition
 - e. Exploring “wholeness” in terms of personal development/formation

David Hewlett

- 1) Leadership
 - a. Why do we major on leadership?
 - b. What is wrong with current leadership (daring to express the truth)?
- 2) Partnership
 - a. Need for guidelines, protocols and expectations
 - b. Risk of using these too softly to be effective
- 3) Character
 - a. What really forms and shapes character?
 - b. What really brings about personal and practical transformation?
 - c. How would formation look if it was modelled around a community of vulnerability (e.g. a L’Arche Community?)
- 4) Denomination/ecumenical polarity
 - a. This is a difficult area: how do we build honesty,
 - b. And clarity of expectations?
- 5) Making Theological Education loveable
 - a. How is it we are passionate about Theological Education, while our traditional funders walk away from us?
 - b. How do we make theological education attractive, lovely and loveable?